

Hugh of Wells **8th Bishop of Lincoln**

c1165 – 1235

Hugh was born in Wells, Somerset, about 1165 and his younger brother, Jocelin, a few years later. Both boys received their early education in their home town, moved away to complete it, and then returned to be canons at Wells cathedral. Both had contacts with the royal court, Hugh witnessing royal charters at York as early as 1199. Hugh became archdeacon of Wells shortly after this time and Jocelin was consecrated bishop of Wells in 1206.

During his reign King John, who showed every sign of being an atheist, was determined to gain control of the church, to appoint its officers and have full authority over its parochial revenues and lands. The clergy wished to keep the Church independent and for the revenues to be used locally. John, however, refused to have Stephen Langton (favoured by the Pope and bishops) as Archbishop of Canterbury and promoted the claims of his own candidate, John de Grey, bishop of Norwich. John continued to appropriate the Church's income. This has echoes of the reign of Henry VIII. John also annulled his first marriage.

In order to curb this behaviour Pope Innocent III issued an edict on 23rd March 1208 excommunicating England and banning the celebration of mass throughout the country. The dead were buried outside the churchyard, with no priest present. Marriages were conducted at the West door with no subsequent wedding mass. The only sacrament to take place inside the building was that of baptism. All the English bishops, except those of Bath, Winchester and Norwich sided with the Pope. The remainder went into exile or retired to monastic life.

The Crown now took over all church lands and revenues in revenge. During these troubled times in 1209 the King appointed Hugh of Wells as Bishop of Lincoln. However no one in England could consecrate him and the King therefore arranged for him to be consecrated by the Archbishop of Milan.

On the way to his consecration Hugh came into contact with the exiled Bishops who wished to keep the Church free from the domination of the Crown. He converted to their thinking, made canonical obedience to Stephen Langton and was consecrated by him as Bishop of Lincoln on 12th December 1209.

France threatened war against England in support of the exiled priests. In 1212 John gave in and abased himself to the Pope. He said that he and his heirs would hold England and Ireland as the fiefdom of the Roman church and that he would pay the pope 1,000 marks a year. This deterred the French king from invading. The exiles returned to their sees in 1213 and Bishop Hugh II dedicated Dunstable Priory on St Luke's Day, 18th October. He did so in the presence of earls, barons, abbots, priors, nobles and the people of Dunstable. In July 1214, the pope finally lifted the interdict from the whole of England.

John then attempted to split the barons and the Church but they remained loyal to each other, culminating in the drawing up of Magna Carta in 1215. Hugh was a witness at Runnymede and was given one of the seven original copies, which has been held at Lincoln since that date.

After their return from exile the clergy were promised restitution and compensation by the Crown but this was never paid in full.

In his fury over the enforcing of Magna Carta, John sacked the whole country, civil war was ensured and Lincoln Cathedral was looted, losing its treasure and income.

In the middle of these troubles Hugh of Wells returned to Lincoln from a visit to the Lateran Council at Rome in November 1215. He found his diocese in a parlous state and set to work to put matters right. He enforced the rule of the Council of Westminster 1179. This stated that all religious houses, such as Dunstable Priory, which held rights of encumbrance must use parochial revenues for the upkeep of the parish and provide it with a vicar. He thus ensured that the revenues were used for the benefit of local people. This work was carried out in 1220. He carried through the orders of the council of 1223 on the standards and organisation of churches throughout the diocese. The Dunstable annals enable us to follow Bishop Hugh in his work of setting up vicarages. His Vicarage Book shows him to have established 369 vicarages throughout his diocese.

Hugh was a Judge in the Secular Court and a Clerk in Chancery. His knowledge in this field would have helped in his discussions on the rights of parishes. His experience in law qualified him as an itinerant Judge and in 1219 he is recorded carrying out this office.

He was a strict and severe administrator and is recorded as excommunicating the Burgesses of Dunstable for not paying their dues to the Priory. He laid down rules for the conduct of his churches and monasteries and checked that these were followed. King John died on 19th October 1216. Hugh was a witness of the coronation of John's 9 year old son, Henry III. He was also a member of the King's Council, till the young king came of age.

During the whole of Hugh of Well's episcopate, building proceeded at Lincoln Cathedral. The cost was met by St Mary's Guild and by the Bishop himself. Designs approved by St. Hugh of Avalon were mostly carried out by Hugh of Wells. These included the northern rose window (Dean's Eye) and the first southern rose window (Bishop's Eye) in the transepts, and parts of the chapter house. He ensured the supply of building materials. The Ringers Chapel in the Cathedral was build by him and bears his name. He actually built as much of Lincoln cathedral as St. Hugh. Hugh II founded a hospital at Wells. Sadly his anti Jewish laws condemned them to virtual starvation and the king, Henry III, intervened to save them.

Hugh of Wells died on February 7th 1235, aged about 70, and is buried in the Retro Choir of Lincoln Cathedral. His will is preserved. Hugh was succeeded by Robert Grosseteste.

In 1963, part of the Dunstable Pageant was a re-enactment of the original Dedication, 750 years previously. By the North Door of the church hangs a painting, which celebrates both events. The Churchwarden at the time, Stan Knowles, played the part of the bishop.